Don't Replace - Re-Pace!

or:

Taking Time: The Secret of (Self)-Renewal

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1. Introduction

Here's the rub: our lives and the society we live in are unsustainable. There is ample proof of this. And so we, the activists - top-downer policy wonks, and bottom-upper grassrooters - shout from the rooftops that we need to be sustainable. Yet even as we mount campaign after campaign, we know in our heart of hearts that this is not the ultimate ideal we should be striving for. We feel that we must promote sustainability as a necessary minimum. At the very least, we must be sustainable - for how can it be otherwise?

"Mere continuing" however (for isn't that what 'sustaining ourselves' means?) can't be all there is to work for, or to look forward to, and given the lack of enthusiasm and deep widespread support, the public at large seem to be aware of that.

The fact is, though, that properly understood, sustainability contains within it some breathtakingly inspiring ideas, if only they are unpacked and framed correctly. True sustainability ultimately means replacing linear growth with a more cyclical conception of regeneration, thus creating a world that holds within it the possibility for ecological, personal and societal renewal that is the key to long-term flourishing.

In order to understand the force of the idea of renewal, let's take a deeper look at some of the limitations of the current perceptions of the idea of sustainability.

2. Sustainability: Too Much – Yet Not Enough

Even though sustainability is a broadly inclusive socially progressive "big-tent" vision for a better world, as it's currently used and understood it has two critical problems, conceptual and rhetorical-strategic. Let's look at each in turn.

One problems is that while "radical" sustainability can be a completely new way of looking at things, a different paradigm, it is more often seen as very mainstream and reformist, coming from the accepted economic discourse of "more," or at least "as much as possible." For example, a sustainable yield of some resource (trees for logging, fish in a fishery) is defined by the maximum harvest possible that will not lead to depletion of the resource: enjoying the fruit without harming the fruitfulness, as it were. This is of course a crucial limit, not least because we surpass it so egregiously in so many fields.

But this understanding is very different from the theme of this blog- *sova* - the idea of "enoughness," a deeply satisfying ***sufficiency***: not the maximum possible consumption for an ongoing high standard of living, but the minimum required for a life of dignity, security and joy, available to all. The universe of discourse of *sova* is not efficiency, quantitative indicators, and damage-minimization, but rather, humility, gratitude and compassionate justice.

Sustainability, in this limited sense of maximum possible yields, should be the most basic and obvious systems condition that no human activity should violate – but it does not fit the bill of being an inspiring, almost utopian ideal to strive for.

This is the other critical problem with sustainability: that it does not motivate the masses, ignite the imagination, that it is drab and very un-fun, not too different from 'just getting by.' The activist-chemist-designer Michael Braungart often points this out: "Sustainability is boring. It is just the minimum. If I asked you: 'How is your relationship with your girlfriend?' and you'd reply 'sustainable', I'd feel sorry for you." Sustainability, he argues, is a terribly passionless, lackluster banner to wave. Wayne Visser, of the Guardian, agrees. Change, Visser argues, requires capturing the hearts and minds of the public, and sustainability, despite its truths and merits, has not done it.

Many sustainability advocate diehards would disagree, for they (we) have something different in their heads about what they mean, which is one reason why sustainability is so difficult to communicate as an ideal.

What's a good sustainability advocate to do? The first thing is to disentangle the idea of sustainability from its own roots, from the environment. This is particularly

surprising and even painful for environmentalists, but no less counter-intuitive for the general public.

3. Sustainability vs. Environment

Many people think that "sustainability" is just another word for "caring for the environment." Sustainable = green. Trendier, for sure, but essentially referring to the same issues and concepts. In other words, the essence of what it means for humans to continue to exist and flourish on this earth is summed up in understanding and improving our relationship to the physical infrastructures of our society: air, water, land, energy, the built environment, and last, and sadly often least, the rest of non-human life.

This is mistaken on a number of levels. The first is that equating the two mistakes the part for the whole. A clean, healthy, productive environment is only one of the components of the larger and more inclusive multifaceted vision of the world-that-could-be that is sustainability. At the very least, this would also include a robust, democratic economy, a just, egalitarian, interconnected society, and a culture and politics of compassion and inclusion. Clearly, not your usual tree-hugger fare.

More importantly, however, reducing sustainability to matters of environment loses entire dimensions of human existence, and creates a blind spot that might be the greatest obstacle to creating deep, long-lasting and systemic change – what Annie Leonard and others call "game-changing solutions." Allowing the physical environment to take center stage focuses our attention almost exclusively on matters of space and place. These are, of course, important: place-making, and taking care of our homes, communities and larger spatial environments are indeed central to building a sustainable society.

But, again, the spatial is only part of a larger picture. As noted, there are of course the social, economic, political and cultural sides of life that demand attention and "revisioning." Even beyond these, though, the other dimension that is becoming increasingly important in promoting sustainability –often ignored or down-played – is the temporal one. Recognizing the importance of time, time scales, and time cycles is one step in the rehabilitation of the idea of sustainability.

One way in which the idea of sustainability already embodies a deeply temporal insight is in its focus on intergenerational justice and responsibility. Recognizing the importance of this "third dimension" of time is crucial. Look at it like this: economic thought is basically a line, with one question - does the line on the growth graph go up or down? Economic reasoning is one-dimensional.

We know though that the rising tide of economic growth doesn't float all boats, and so social concern brings in a much-needed second dimension: how is that wealth distributed in different sectors and classes of society? If wealth is being created, as it is in our growth-oriented society, everybody should be a getting a little richer, not just the vastly wealthy becoming more so.

Reality, though, is three-dimensional. And even though the idea of "environment" is primarily linked with matters of space and place, a concern for the earth is not only about our common home, but also about our common future. Realizing that we have inherited the world from previous generations and will bequeath it to subsequent ones, means that even a focus on just distribution, if limited to the here and now, is no more than partial.

Sustainability is about sustaining our abilities *over time*. We must not sacrifice long-term benefit for short-term gains – that is simply robbing our grandchildren to feed our children, and the height of unsustainability. As activist and visionary David Brower was known to have commented: “Environmentalists may make meddlesome neighbors, but they make great ancestors.”

But even that doesn't begin to exhaust the discussion of sustainability and time.

4. It's About Time…

A critical look at how we experience and structure time in our lives is long overdue. Yes, it's about time. There are multiple aspects of the role of time in our lives that relate to making the world more sustainable. I'd like to address two of them here: one has already gotten a great deal of press, but the other needs better PR, and will help us understand the deeper messages of sustainability.

The first is simply the rate at which we live our lives: how quickly we consume, deplete, use, or burn up, all the material inputs that our lifestyle demands. The German thinker and activist Wolfgang Sachs writes about this eloquently:

"[T]he ecological crisis can be read as a clash of different time scales; the time scale of modernity collides with the time-scales which govern life and the earth… Every year, the industrial system burns as much fossil fuel as the earth has stored up in a period of nearly a million years. Within a second, in terms of geological time, the planet's reserves are about to vanish in the fireworks of the industrial age… the time gained through fuel-driven acceleration is in reality time transferred from the time stock accumulated in fossil reserves to the engines of our vehicles… The rates of interest and discount are at odds with the rate of natural regeneration.

Furthermore, the collision between industrial and biological time is most tangible in agriculture… An enormous amount of resources and ingenuity is brought into position against the times inherent to organic beings to squeeze out more output in shorter periods of time. Cows and chicken or rice and wheat are selected, bred, chemically treated, and increasingly genetically modified in order to accelerate their yield. However, the imposition of industrial time on natural rhythms cannot be achieved without a staggering price. Animals are kept in appalling conditions, disease spreads, pollution advances, soils degenerate, species diversity is narrowed down, and evolution is not given enough time to adapt. A host of ecological problems in the area of agriculture derive from the fact that the rhythms of nature are kept hostage for the high-speed economy of our time."

Both the environmental and the human cost of the blistering pace of modern life have given birth to a number of movements whose main message is simply: Slow down! Reduce the soul-destroying tempo of crazy industrial modern urban life. Rethink the treadmill/rat race lifestyle, and revalue leisure, that is, "non-goal-oriented" personal, family and community time. Remember that 'standard of living' is not only *not* identical to 'quality of life,' but that its blind pursuit can lead in the diametrically opposite direction, systematically eroding the non-quantifiable bases of what we truly value in a good life.

First came the reaction to the gastronomic, nutritional and cultural disaster that is fast food, aptly named the slow food movement, that has spread from its birthplace in Italy throughout the world. Food, though, whose production, preparation and consumption takes place in a larger urban context, is only one aspect of our hectic lives. The emphasis on taking time and investing appreciation in these basic acts that sustain life, has led to a call to change the culture of cities that are the framework of

our lives. This spawned the call for slow cities- a movement now with hundreds of member cities worldwide.

Much of this escalating pace of life and work is a function of our economy, with the demand for relentless growth at its core, determining the indices of well-being, and driving the larger consumer culture. This is one of the central themes of this blog.

Thus, the inevitable next step has been taken – a nascent movement for slow money – calling to change how we look at investments, define favorable rates of return, and what sorts of projects with different time horizons contributing different sorts of value, are worthy of financial backing.

Slowing down can bring perspective and breathing space, and help us understand what else needs to change. That first step is indeed to go from worrying about constantly *replacing* our things, to focusing our attention on *re-pacing* our very lives.

However, simply slowing our material metabolisms, and our pace of living in general, will not get the job done. As Lester Brown, founder of WorldWatch and currently of the Earth Policy Institute once remarked: "If you're headed in the wrong direction, it won't help to slow down. You'll still get to where you don't want to go – it'll just take longer!"

To put it a different way, the impact of quantitative changes is limited. Real transformation is not just about "more" and "less," even when that means "fast" and "slow." (For a masterful discussion of this, see Donella Meadows "Leverage Points – Places To Intervene In A System"). The key next step, then, is a qualitative one, changing how we experience and shape time in general.

This is the second, less-discussed aspect of time mentioned above.

5. Closing the Loop: The Limits of Linearity

Western industrial culture is highly linear in its outlook on time. We see history as an arrow, marching straightforwardly from the past through the present into the future. Who didn't grow up with a time line on the wall of their classroom? Likewise, we tend to see our own lives as a straight line, an unambiguous journey from birth through maturation to death.

Our material cultures too have become highly linear, termed the "take-make-waste" model: we extract raw materials of various types from certain places, manufacture consumer goods in other ones, ship and use them all over the world, and of course get rid of all the waste by "throwing it away" - but of course there is no 'away'. Even if some things are recycled, they will eventually end up in a dump somewhere, not returning to their source to start over again.

This is another way of understanding sustainability: it's about closing the loops, designing processes that can continue indefinitely because they do not depend on non-renewable resources that will inevitably be depleted, or continuous inputs of huge amounts of energy.

Take an example from agriculture. In a traditional multi-purpose farm, some of the food grown on the farm would feed the livestock, their excrement would be composted to fertilize the crops, and thus the land retained its fertility to raise more food and livestock: a closed loop that could go on indefinitely.

In the industrial model, small-scale diversification like that is seen as inefficient. The economy of scale and specialization dominate: mono-cropping large tracts of land in one area, and raising large herds of livestock in another. Suddenly, what was once a "solution" (to a problem that didn't exist) are now two separate, and serious, problems. Expensive large-scale techno-fixes are needed to deal with all the excrement piling up, polluting waterways and creating greenhouse gases. Moreover, to maintain the fertility of the land, we use greater and greater quantities of highly petroleum-intensive chemical fertilizers, mined and transported from various places on the globe, also contributing toxic runoff, and a host of pollution issues.

While this intensive approach – the post WWII "Green Revolution" - may have produced more food since its inception, it's highly debatable whether it still does, especially as compared with more diversified smaller scale programs, in both developed and underdeveloped areas, and whether its inherent unsustainability is not a disaster in the making over the long term.

Closing the loops of material processes, agricultural and technological systems as well as product design, is crucial. Nothing can fulfill the minimum definition of sustainability without it. But this isn't just a technical thing: linearity in our lives is not just about production lines. It is, as noted above, how we experience time in general.

Natan Margalit said it well in this space:

"…whereas the ethos of our times is to move forward unceasingly, in a more sane and inter-connected world there are rhythms. Embracing rhythm sounds simple but it is a paradigm shifting thought – it means that there are boundaries on productivity to make room for other values. When we take time out of productivity we can give it back to community, family, civil organizing, reading, culture democracy. Ecologically and theologically, it means that we consider that we are not owners and rulers in the world, but that we are ourselves a part of larger patterns, and we are bound by rhythms that tie us to the rest of life."

The rising and the setting of the sun, the ever changing nighttime sky, and the cold and heat, rain, snow and dryness, of the seasons of the year: wonderful ingenious technologies, like electric lighting, air conditioning and heating, and the global food market, have made our lives incredibly comfortable, yet at the same time, distance us from these primal human experiences.

The linearity of our technological society has erased or overridden the cycles in our lives in so many ways. It is the rhythms and cycles – day, season, year, life – that allow us to pause and take stock, to see where we have been and where we are going, to feel the pace and pulse of our lives. This erasure is largely responsible for the 'cult of speed,' the highly *un*natural tempo of life, including the turbo-charged rate of resource use, that is part and parcel of the lifestyle critiqued previously.

It's no wonder that traditional tribal and religious societies emphasize cyclical views of time. The Bible itself begins not only with the description of the creation of the physical world, but of the creation of the week, of cycles in time. While the seven-day week is not a pre-existing natural rhythm, this spiritual-cultural cycle of the days of the week is the most integrated into our workaday lives, which for a Jew means from *shabbat* to *shabbat*.

This is the other side of time – the one less discussed and reflected on than the straightforward quantitative linear question of rate, tempo and pace. The idea of the rhythms and cycles in time, internalizing them and weaving them into our home and work lives, our social policies and our economic thought, is key.

The idea of a weekly day of rest is a gift to the world from the Hebrew Bible. It is fair to say that our modern world would be inconceivable without the rhythm of work and

rest, the work-week and week-end. Yet the Bible didn't stop there: it continued the idea of sacred cycles of seven into the scale of years as well.

That is the basis of the idea of *shmita*, the seventh year, the sabbatical year of release. The clearest way to understand the essence of *shmita* is to think of it as *"shabbat* on steroids." Both are defined by many obligations and restrictions that are inimical to our modern Western notion of rest and recreation as kicking back, taking it easy and doing what we feel like. The rules, though, create new and different opportunities, precisely because of what we cannot do, or what we have to do, which prevents our "time off" from simply being an escape into mushy mindlessness.

A traditional *shabbat* is a complete disruption of our work lives for one day a week - no material production, no market-based consumption, limited energy use, and a focus on family, food, friends and affairs of the spirit. A regular day off means not going into work; *shabbat*, though, is not just about not going to work, it's about work not coming to you. It's about not being a slave to work, and not letting work-like activities leak into your home life. This includes, among other things, the numerous screen-fed activities that have become so dominant in our lives. Precisely because of a growing feeling among many that it is so easy to become slaves to our own tools, this idea of unplugging a day a week to reclaim control over our time and lives is gaining traction in non-observant, even non-Jewish circles.

Yet, while the deep idea of *shabbat* is quite a revolutionary vision, since it is seemingly familiar to us (even to the non-observant), we think we know what it is about. *Shmita*, on the other hand, partly because it seems so distant from our own reality, is a truly radical wake-up call to a capitalist society that, after the failure of communism, thinks it has all the answers, and sees itself not as *the best* system available, but as *the only* game in town, the only political-economic arrangement that is even conceivable.

If *shabbat* didn't already exist, in today's economic climate it would be impossible to legislate devoting one day in seven to 'non-productive' activity. Similarly, *shmita* is not an institution (yet) – and so it is exceedingly difficult to conceive how to make it so. But let us imagine the possibilities.

Where the *shabbat* day transforms our home and communal lives, the *shmita* year has the power to transform our entire society. *Shabbat* challenges us to rethink our

very definitions of work and rest, *shmita* does the same for wealth, private property, and social solidarity. *Shmita* suggests a different scale of values regarding rights to property, the centrality of economic productiveness, the need for communal interdependence, and the possibilities for closing the growing social gap and the redistribution of wealth. If we were to follow it as law as ancient Jewish society did, it would not gently suggest, but strictly enforce such a transformation.

But for us, it is enough that it invites us to rethink what is really important in our definitions of quality of life, weaning us from the idea that a rising or falling GDP is the measure of well-being. It thus has the potential to reconnect us to what truly sustains us, and how to sustain those roots of sustenance.

The technical, or even environmental side, of sustainability is how to sustain levels of production, or the physical environment, over time. But deep sustainability also relates to these roots of sustenance: we don't just need an economy that can sustain *itself*, important and imperiled as that is; we need a moral, spiritual and cultural life that can sustain and nourish *us*.

The idea of sustenance brings us to the idea of renewal or rejuvenation that is the focus of the last section. I believe this idea entails a different way of understanding sustainability that is spiritually richer, rhetorically more compelling, and strategically more useful.

6. Shmita and The Secret of Self-Renewal

In thinking about and advocating a vision of sustainability, we don't want a vision that simply says "as much as possible," simply with the emphasis moved from the "as much" to the "as possible," especially a technocratic, uninspiring one. Likewise, we want a richer, more engaging frame, that's not just about the environment and matters of space, but helps us rethink how we construe and construct the 'timescapes' of our lives, from inter-generational equity, via re-pacing production and consumption, to closing the loop, and returning a healing cyclicity to our life.

Earlier this year, I accompanied the Hazon-Heschel Sustainable Food Tour to a meeting with an inspiring teacher of permaculture here in Israel named Talia Schneider. We were talking about the idea of sustainability, and she expressed

misgivings regarding the term similar to those outlined above. She suggested a different expression to convey the underlying idea. She spoke of learning and teaching "the secret of (self) renewal." She emphasized both parts of the term.

First, that there is a secret here, some deeper layer of life that requires insight and wisdom, and collective perseverance, not just technical prowess, economic acumen, or clear-cut public policy. The human race, and each society and culture within it, in each generation, each with its own challenges and opportunities, needs to discover the secret of living together on this earth in a way that everything and everyone can stay fresh, can become renewed.

The second half, "renewal," is not a new idea in the realm of sustainability. Developing renewable energy sources, for instance, is fundamental. Fossil fuels are inherently unsustainable, for no matter how slowly we use them, they will run out. Things that don't renew themselves end. They cannot sustain themselves. Nothing is sustainable if it's not renewable.

Only in the ideal world of Euclidean geometry do lines go on forever. In the real world, things linear come to an end. It is the cyclicity of time that ensures the possibility of renewal and continuance. Anything that emphasizes the cyclical nature of time in our so linear society is important. The force of the idea of (self) renewal is that it's not just about energy, or other physical resources. It's about us, our occupations and pre-occupations, our loves and our lives. Renewability, or to use our term, the secret of self-renewal, is thus a deeper form of sustainability, and expresses a psycho-spiritual force that can engender a far deeper personal and societal transformation.

During *shmita,* a sort of year-long *shabbat* of economic rest and agricultural and financial renewal, people would devote themselves to more intellectual or spiritual pursuits, working only to fulfill their most basic physical needs. It was a different sort of "third way", since it bolstered a basic small-holders capitalist free-market economy with punctuated periods of economic and personal renewal, which prevented entrenched poverty and concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. *Shmita* structured *all* economic activity so that it served citizens and society, not the other way around.

Shmita, then, more than giving us ready-made answers, calls us to ask disquieting questions about our lives, our society and our economy, which are even more urgent now than they were three thousand years ago. One of these foundational questions is about the possibility for renewal, whose very framing exposes the deep connections between the spiritual and the economic. People, animals and land rest in the sabbatical year. Just as silence is an integral part of speech, punctuated periods of ‘fallowness’ are crucial for guaranteeing continued creativity and fertility. People, indeed, are like land: when overwork leads to exhaustion, we engineer continued "vitality" for both, not with true renewal, but with chemicals.

Things do get old. We get old. This is not a bad thing. Fetishistic obsession with youth or newness for its own sake is an illness, and is the opposite of renewal. Here is a part of the trick, the secret: to find new sides to old things, to see familiar sights with new eyes.

And if you can answer Braungart's question and say that your relationship with your spouse isn't (just) sustainable, but that you have discovered the secret of self-renewal – neither he nor anybody will feel sorry for you! On the contrary, it is exactly what we should be striving for, to apply in our own work, relationships and communities, and all the way on up to a self-renewing, sustainable society and world.